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AUTHOR Schneibel, Dan
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ABSTRACT

The phenomenological-existential therapy known as gestalt therapy sees awareness as its major goal. Clients are helped to become aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they can change themselves while, at the same time, learning to accept and value themselves. An important topic in the gestalt group process is the key concept--a concept that defines members as unique individuals and social beings. In addition, there is affirmation of and belief in each person as a potentially healthy person with all the necessary equipment to live a satisfying life. The group leader is valued for an ability to work at both the individual and group levels and to move smoothly back and forth between the two levels. The most basic technique in working toward awareness is simple observation. Other techniques used in group counseling with gestalt therapy include awareness experiments, unfinished business, exaggeration, reversals, making the rounds, fantasy approaches, and rehearsal. Gestalt therapy has proven to be effective in time-limited situations. It is applicable to a variety of problems and is used with children, adolescents, and adults. It provides a perspective on growth and enhancement while focusing on current behaviors. Group members are given the opportunity to do their own seeing, feeling, sensing, and interpreting. (NB)

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GROUP COUNSELING USING THE GESTALT APPROACH

A PAPER
SUBMITTED TO
DR. GERI MILLER

BY
DAN SCHNEIBEL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR
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INTRODUCTION

Upon entering the counseling profession today, a person is faced with the difficult task of choosing a theory to use as a philosophical base in practice. Organizing one's thoughts, values, knowledge, and personal assets into a congruent theory of counseling is a intriguing task in itself. It would seem obvious that the ultimate goal of counselors is to develop a personal, integrated, and systematic approach based on the principles of different theories. This eclectic approach would allow the counselor maximum flexibility in dealing with the needs of individual clients. However, the recurring theme throughout the counseling literature is that the counselor must have a strong foundation within a theory. This foundation provides the counselor with a rationale for his or her approach to the therapy situation (Jones, 1982).

THE ROOTS OF GESTALT THERAPY

Gestalt is a German word which has no exact translation in English. The closest one can come in translating gestalt is wholeness, configuration, or completeness of form. This phenomenological-existential therapy founded by Fredrick (Fritz) and Laura Perls in the 1940s teaches therapists and patients the phenomenological method of awareness in which perceiving,

feeling, and acting are distinguished from interpreting and reshuffling pre-existing attitudes. The goal is for clients to become aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they can change themselves while at the same time, to learn to accept and value themselves.

IMPORTANCE OF GROUP PROCESS IN GESTALT THERAPY

One of the most important topics in looking at gestalt group process is the key concept (Korb &Themis, 1980). This concept places the members as human beings who are unique individuals and social beings.

A second major concept is affirmation of and belief in each person as a potentially healthy person who has all the necessary personal equipment in the form of energy, perception, and mechanisms for choice that he/she needs to live a satisfying life (Korb & Themis, 1980).

THERAPEUTIC GOALS

The major goal in gestalt therapy is awareness. This includes greater awareness in a particular area and also greater ability for the patient to bring automatic habits into awareness as needed. Awareness includes knowing the environment, responsibility for choices, self-knowledge, and self-acceptance, and the ability to contact. Solving problems is a chief concern with many new patients. The issue for the gestalt therapist is how patients support themselves in solving problems.

The question of therapeutic goals can be considered from the point of

view of personal goals for each member and of group--process goals for the group as a whole. Goals for the members to achieve on the group level include the following:

* learning how to ask clearly and directly for what they want or need
* learning how to deal with one another in the face of conflict
* learning how to give support and energy to one another
* being able to challenge one another to push beyond the boundaries of safety and what is known
* creating a community that is based on trust, which allows for a level of deep and meaningful work
* learning how to make use of the resources within the group rather than relying on the group leader as the director

ROLE OF THE LEADER

The expertise of the gestalt leader involves his ability to work at both individual and group levels and his ease in moving smoothly back and forth between the two levels. In working with a specific group member, his skill hinges on his ability to suggest techniques that will help the person intensify his or her experience, in his alertness to nonverbal cues, and in his capacity to identify various projections, introjections, and contact-avoiding behaviors as these are manifested in the patient's behavior. With regard to the overall group context in which the patient is embedded, the leader must be ready to

decide quickly when to focus on his or her individual conflicts and when to work with the group as a whole (Shaffer, Galinsky, 1989).

One of the therapist's functions is to challenge clients to get through the impasse so that growth is possible. It is indeed a difficult function, because at the point of impasse clients think that they have no chance of survival. They desperately try to manipulate others into doing their seeing and hearing for them. If therapists are not careful, they can easily get caught up in the manipulations of their clients (Corey, 1990).

Although gestalt leaders encourage members to assume responsibility for raising their own levels of consciousness, they can nevertheless take an active role in creating experiments to help the members tap their own resources. Zinker (1978) writes that the therapist, functioning much like an artist, invents experiments with clients to augment their range of behaviors. He adds that the group leader is not always the person who invents the experiments. Rather, the leader's function is to create an atmosphere and structure in which the group's own creativity and inventiveness can emerge. Shepard (1970) emphasizes that the therapist's capacity for I/Thou, here-and-now relationships is a basic requisite for effectively using gestalt techniques. If clients are to become authentic, they need contact with an authentic therapist on a genuine I/Thou basis.

THERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUES AND STRATEGIES

The following techniques and strategies may seem rather clear-cut and simple, but it takes considerable skill and creativity on the part of the therapist to be successful in their implementation. In addition, these techniques should not be thought of as unrelated, rigid categories. These techniques may be implemented with one another to contribute to the developmental process of gestalt therapy. Each technique will be followed by an illustration of how that particular technique could be implemented by a school counselor.

The most basic technique in working toward awareness is simple observation. The therapist should monitor any and all observable behavior that occurs during the course of therapy. Some observable behaviors might include posture, voice quality changes, figgeting, and eye contact.

To increase the chances that members will benefit from Gestalt techniques, group leaders need to communicate the general purpose of these techniques and to create an experimental climate (Corey, 1990). In discussing the need for a brief explanation of the purpose of the technique, Passons (1975) observes that clients may be puzzled by the certain gestalt exercises, and that a brief explanation can dispel this perplexity and lead to greater willingness to experiment. Other techniques along with the Awareness Experiments (mentioned earlier), include

UNFINISHED BUSINESS - which is helping the group member to work through unresolved feelings that often present themselves in situations that are similar or related to the feelings of the present. As one unfinished business is resolved, increased energy is released for dealing with other situations. A concept related to unfinished business is avoidance, which refers to the means people use to keep themselves from facing unfinished business and from experiencing the uncomfortable emotions associated with unfinished situations. Perls (1969) says that most people would rather avoid experiencing painful emotions than do what is necessary to change.

EXAGGERATION - involves asking a group member to exaggerate a body movement he may have previously been unaware of. This technique is used so the member will become aware of the meaning of the movement. An example could be students who shrug their shoulders when they are asked why their assignments have not been completed.

REVERSALS - consists of asking the group members to behave in a manner contrary to their feelings. This is a type of behavioral flooding. The individual who feels they need to be in charge of everything, should imitate the shy, quiet follower.

MAKING THE ROUNDS - is an exercise that enables each person to go around to each group member and say something that he or she finds hard to communicate verbally. This gives the person an opportunity to feel what it is

like to share this inner feeling.

FANTASY APPROACHES - is an exercise that experiments with a diversity of fantasy situations in a group that can lead to significant growth (Corey, 1990). This fantasy can promote personal awareness. An example might be to express and explore feelings of shame and guilt.

REHEARSAL - is a technique that invites members to say out loud what they are thinking. Rehearsal techniques can be especially useful when it is obvious members are doing a lot of blocking.

In any group or individual therapy, a very important technique is the attention to confidentiality as well as acceptance and support from other group members (Holiman & Engle, 1989).

REASONS FOR SELECTING THE GESTALT GROUP THERAPY

Gestalt therapy has proven to be effective in time-limited situations such as in school settings. It is applicable to a variety of problems and is used with children, adolescents, and adults. It provides a perspective on growth and enhancement, not merely a treatment of disorders. Gestalt therapy is applicable to teaching, learning and classroom organizational development. It focuses on current behaviors "here and now." The group members have an opportunity to do their own seeing, feeling, sensing, and interpreting (Jones, 1982).

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